

## Baptized and Beloved

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Nan Adams preached this sermon January 10, 2010, The Baptism of the Lord.  
Trinity Presbyterian Church, Pensacola, FL.

Let's go for a moment to the banks of the River Jordan where Jesus is being baptized. Here Jesus makes his first public appearance as an adult on the stage of human history. John the Baptist, repentance-preaching, fire-breathing John, had prepared the people for a Messiah who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. And here he is, Jesus, going under the water and coming up out of the water. While he prays his own post-baptism prayer, suddenly heaven itself opens, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, a voice comes from heaven speaking to Jesus, (can all who are gathered hear the voice? or only some? but certainly Jesus hears): "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased, with you I *take delight* (another interpretation of the Greek)."

Joanna Adams, the Presbyterian preacher, in fact, who baptized my daughter, Morgan, remembered a theater production in Atlanta of Clarence Jordan's *Cotton Patch Gospel*.<sup>1</sup> In this production the excellent actor Tom Key played God. Tom stood on a ladder on the stage. The actor playing the recently-immersed Jesus stood below him looking up with hope and perhaps a little bit of anxiety in his eyes. But he needn't have worried. God speaks in a voice loud enough to be heard all the way down Peachtree Street: "You are my boy, Jesus. I am so proud of you!"

Joanna writes, "I could feel in the marrow of my bones the exuberant love and approval in the actor's voice, and I believe that something similar happens between God and us in our own baptisms: 'This one is mine!' the Lord exclaims. 'I see my image in her! Don't you see my image in him? And here comes my Spirit, my Spirit to sustain and guide as you go about doing what I put you on earth to do.'"

In this event, baptism means more than repentance and cleansing. Here baptism issues in the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the giving of redemptive identity to Jesus the Savior. This is where we learn what Jesus is meant to do in God's world, what role he is meant to play. So much lies ahead for Jesus from this point in the narrative. He must live out this identity and meet so many expectations laid on him. Look how John has been speaking about the anointed one already; remember how the crowds will project their hopes and desires on him. How indeed will Jesus live out this calling?

Jesus' baptism thus leads us to consider the meaning of "vocation," a word that has lost much of its meaning through repeated use. *Vocatio* means "calling," but most often we think of our vocation as simply a job or career, a chosen profession or a particular task. The notion that it is God who calls seems perhaps familiar when we are talking about "church vocations," calls to "ministry" or "the religious life," but it sounds a little over the top when we think about ordinary jobs in ordinary life. In general, we understand vocations as the way we make our livings, the way we provide for our families or create resources to build a life that mingles with and contributes to society.

Of course, if you've been a Presbyterian long (or any mainline Protestant denomination) you'd be quick to point out that we know better – any and all virtuous jobs in this world could be

potential “callings” from God. John Calvin, for one, taught that the work of the waitress and the plumber is as precious to God as the labor of any preacher, physician or scholar. Although this understanding of vocational calling is not, in itself, a bad thing, it often sounds unconvinced and patronizing. Class condescension and resentments lurk here, and besides, twenty-first century lives seem a lot more complicated than that. We do not have just one vocation, one calling, but a multiplicity of calls with competing claims upon the stewardship of our lives. Most often we find ourselves struggling to balance a multitude of different responsibilities and relationships, and anointing one of our vocations as holier than another may be a dangerous thing. Is ministry more a vocation than marriage, or my responsibility as a citizen less than my relationship to my family? The United States of America is in desperate need of more volunteers – skilled, experienced volunteers – to serve in its armed services around the world. But what if I’m a single-parent with small children? How do I decide? The claims of others call out to us, often by name, and often out of genuine need.

And what if vocations seem to change in the course of life? What one once felt called to do no longer seems right. What then? Sometimes, of course, the covenants of the past must hold us in faithfulness. But sometimes new callings come and lives are remade, transformed in response to that calling. What of those who are adrift, unsure of any calling? Our lovely imagery of vocation then seems naïve, better suited for the supposed stability and limited choices of an earlier age.

But consider this: the calling of Jesus is not about a job or a career. It is not even a word of mission, sending him into the future. Not at the beginning. The word of baptism is first of all about the *delight of God in this beloved*, this chosen, this child called by name. Not a call to do, but a calling that names, a calling that rejoices *simply in our being*.

As for Jesus, so for us. Our first calling, the baptismal call, is the one that simply loves and names: *You are my child. I delight in you*. The words embrace us and promise to hold us. This is where it begins, and this is also, we dare claim, where it ends – the last word, the one that holds our future. We dare to claim that God, indeed, will welcome us home, into his embrace at the end of our earthly lives.

Yet in between that beginning and that end, this baptismal call will often become a call to action. It will mean mission and ministry and all kinds of tasks. Anointing is a sign of blessing, but it is also a commissioning, a sending out by God to do the work of God. As for Jesus, so for us.

A poem by James Autry about baptism goes like this:

*There is something about putting people under the water and raising  
them up in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
Something that makes people cry  
That makes them want everything to be alright  
That makes them want to leave this place and be better,  
to immerse themselves in their lives  
And somehow be washed clean of all the things they should not have done  
and still should not want to do.*

*That's it.  
Not the other things,  
The star in the east,  
The treasures in heaven  
Or any of the old stories,  
Not even life after death.  
It's only to be new again.*

"Here is the deal. God chooses to bring us into the world. God's grace claims us and reclaims us over and over again. We don't need to get all riled up over whether or not we are adequate or worthy. With the exception of Jesus, we are all unworthy and without hope save in God's sovereign mercy."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you've heard the story about an incident following an infant baptism. On the way home after worship, the brother of the baby who had been baptized cried from the back seat all the way home. O, he cried and cried. Three times his dad asked him what he was crying about. Finally, he answered, "The preacher said he wanted us to be brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys."

We who are baptized struggle just like everybody else to be decent human beings. We are no more or less tempted than anybody else to be less than God created us to be. But Jesus our Lord and Savior showed us how to beat the demons back, and God gave us the spiritual power to choose a higher and better way. "From our baptism onward, we live inside the promise that we will have a strength that comes from another realm – the realm of God – that will enable us to will and to work for God's good pleasure. I love the thought of God standing on a ladder somewhere or even better, sitting on a star in the heavens, saying, "Do you see my girl down there? I am so proud of her. She's not perfect, but she's mine." The thought fills me with joy."<sup>3</sup>

In his book *Craddock Stories*, celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. "I am from around these parts," he said. "My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused. When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance in your face.' Then he swatted me on the back side and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life."

"What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked. He answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper."

Dr. Craddock said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper.

Children of God, remember that you have been baptized and rejoice. If you never have been baptized, then find a church (maybe even this one) and claim your inheritance. For not every cry can be answered and not every call is from God. So it is a blessing when we can thank God for the joy of purpose in our lives and for times when the call to a certain task seems clear. Yet even when our callings seem hard to sort out or beyond our ability to fulfill, even in the day of failure and betrayal, I pray for each of us to remember again the calling that comes first and last. The tasks and duties do matter, but what abides – our identity, our belonging, our worth, our hope – is heard here, standing by the waters of baptism. “You are my child, the beloved, with you I am well-pleased – in you I take delight.” Amen.

#### NOTES

1. The Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams, “God Believes in You,” a sermon on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22, heard on *Day 1 Radio*, January 10, 2010.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.